

February 27, 2003

The Honorable Dino Rossi, Chair
Senate Ways & Means Committee
316 John A. Cherberg Building
Post Office Box 40405
Olympia, Washington 98504-0405

Dear Senator Rossi:

I am writing to share the position of the State Board of Health on Senate 5920, regarding public health services, which your committee is scheduled to hear today.

The Board is on record as supporting “the establishment of a stable and secure funding source for public health that would be adequate to enable local health jurisdictions, the Department of Health, and the State Board of Health to comply with the Public Health Improvement Plan as required under RCW 43.70 (notably sections 520, 550, and 580).”

Although the Board has not taken a position of the funding mechanism that should be employed to provide such funding, the property tax mechanism described in SB 5920 is certainly one option for meeting state and local governments’ obligation to provide for the public’s health and safety. In the end it will be up to the Legislature to determine whether it is better to secure public health funding legislatively in Olympia or to refer the matter to a broader public forum that culminates in a vote of the people.

We are pleased to see that SB 5920 is not solely about establishing a funding source; it is also about outcomes and accountability—both to state government and through local boards of health to local communities.

At its January 8 meeting, the Board heard a series of presentations about the Public Health Improvement Partnership (PHIP) process, including:

- A review of the history of public health funding in Washington State;
- A report on the recently concluded baseline assessment of whether 34 local health jurisdictions and 38 Department of Health program sites are meeting the PHIP “Standards for Public Health in Washington State”; and
- An analysis by the PHIP Finance Committee of the costs of a fully functional public health system.

The public health system demonstrates performance through the PHIP standards. Those standards are being met for those activities that have been funded. However, the PHIP standards

and the public expect far more from public health. In short, public health is being asked to do more with less.

The January 8 presentations also iterated the findings of the Board's November 2001 report, *Response Capacity During A Health Emergency—A Review of Selected Issues*. National, state, and local public health systems in have been inadequately funded and staffed for years. This has resulted in progressive loss of public health system capacity to provide essential services. The current public health infrastructure is not adequate to respond to potential health threats that include possible use of biological agents, new and re-emerging diseases such as West Nile virus, and the proliferation of disease organisms resistant to antimicrobial agents.

The Board strongly believes, therefore, that providing stable and secure funding for public health—roughly on the order of magnitude of \$100 million a year—must be a top fiscal priority for the state of Washington.

Governor Gary Locke's proposed budget makes a commitment to preserving current state funding for public health without a property tax increase. Indeed, the Priorities of Government exercise identified "maintain and improve the state's public health system" as the top goal under the priority of "Improving the Health of Washington Citizens." Should the Legislature choose to pursue the funding strategy proposed in SB 5920, it is important that property tax funding be used to augment—and not supplant—current public health funding to the greatest extent possible. Moreover, no existing or proposed state or local revenue source for public health that would be supplanted by property tax revenues collected under SB 5920 should be withdrawn unless and until those new revenues are available for distribution to public health agencies.

Thank you for your attention to this critical policy issue.

Sincerely,



Linda Lake, Chair
Washington State Board of Health

cc: Senate Ways & Means Committee Members
Senator Jim West
Ms. Mich'l Needham, Governor's Office of Health Policy
Ms. Patty Hayes, Department of Health
Ms. Vicki Kirkpatrick, WSALPHO
Washington State Board of Health Members
Mr. Don Sloma, State Board of Health